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ABSTRACT

Most high school students fall into the "unspecial" category--they are not at either extreme of achievement, and they receive a small share of the fiscal and human resources of their schools. Anxieties about these average students' performance in high school and their tendency to clog college developmental English and math classes sparked much of the reform literature of the 1980s. Curriculum reform in the 1980s went in either of two basic directions: tighten the screws on local systems to make sure they were accountable for toughened policies and curriculum guidelines established in the state house; and empower local systems and center reform in the hands of teachers and building-level administrators. What has become known as the "restructuring movements" began for some with the second direction and the formation of the Coalition of Essential Schools in 1985. The Coalition is a national network of public and private schools committed to a ground-up reconceptualization of schools and to nine common principles about what a good school is and how teachers and students in good schools spend their time. Two of the principles add up to a strong commitment to heterogenous grouping. Essential schools, and others which implement their practices, offer the best hope for all students. In 1989, the National Council of Teachers of English also recommended heterogeneous grouping. (Contains 53 references.) (RS)

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What About Dick? In Search of English Classrooms That Work for the Unspecial

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This session was to have started with questions and ended with not only tentative answers but, if things went well, a clearer focus on what questions mattered most. Nearly a year ago, I began work on a proposal for the 1993 convention.

This is how it began:

> Remember Tom, Dick, and Harry? Tom gets special attention at school. He is academically talented, a leader. Someday, Tom may be in the research lab or on the Senate floor; he has much to offer society. Harry also gets special attention at school. Unlike Tom, though, Harry is in trouble. He's at-risk or has ADD; he may drop out. Without an education that meets his needs, Harry may not make it as an adult.
>
> Then there's Dick, everykid. Whether called a "reg" or simply one of "the unspecial," it will be today's average student who, along with millions of others, comprise the overwhelming majority, that will pay the bill for Tom in the lab and Harry in the lineup.

Concerned about the experiences of average kids in English classrooms, recalling too many articles and too many workshops where, it turned out, the neat new program was for kids who stood out for one reason or another -- unsure about what is happening in plain old English class, the class where the majority of secondary students spend fifty-two minutes a day five days a week -- I found the new study group format especially appealing. In study groups, NCTErs of common curiosities would meet to address a specified topic, would clarify their thinking and terminology, and then -- analytic lenses in place, notebooks in hand -- have a go at the remainder of the convention and, as it were,

find answers. A follow-up get-together would give those who stayed the course the opportunity to reconvene, share notes and handouts, and put their findings together.

I recruited Vicki Catlin, an excellent English teacher at Fairdale High, an innovative school in south Jefferson County near Louisville, to be my co-facilitator, borrowed my Tom-Dick-and-Harry title from a talk Ted Hipple made a few years ago at Columbus College, met the proposal deadline with breathless eleventh-hour flare, and waited until program invitations were issued last May. When mine came, I was alternately pleased, surprised, and a bit puzzled to learn that our proposed study group, through the mysterious wisdom of the program committee, had metamorphosed into a concurrent session, a session which, rather than being replete with questions explored through collegial inquiry, would be the usual talking-heads followed by (you guessed it) a question-and-answer session. More important, I was now obliged to have answers rather than questions, to present rather than facilitate, to be (in the phrase that I use sooner or later in most of my methods classes) a reluctant sage on the stage rather than play my preferred role of guide on the side.

So here I am, a guy more comfortable with questions than answers, and there you are, impatiently waiting for talking head #1 to get on with it or yield the floor to talking head #2. And that's precisely what I will do, for Ms. Catlin, through her everyday work at Fairdale, through her experiences as a Citibank Coalition Faculty member, and through her school's participation in the Coalition of Essential Schools, comes far closer than most to having worked out and worked with both new school structures and emerging methodologies which offer the best hope for Dick.

First, though, let me survey what has -- and has not -- been happening in the past decade to kids like Dick and

Derrick and Denise in English class. These are the kids who, as described in Horace's Compromise (Sizer, 1984), The Shopping Mall High School (Powell, 1987), and other reform-oriented publications of the eighties, pass through our overcrowded classrooms without being noticed more than superficially, the kids who, according to John Goodlad (1984), know that school is where it's at in the typically confusing world of adolescence, but who through genial passive resistance negotiate a series of unwritten, even unrecognized treaties with their teachers so that they may emerge two or three years later, diploma in hand, without ever seriously engaging their minds. These kids are those whom Arthur Powell designates the unspecial (1987), kids the October, 1992, issue of English Journal calls the "regs" (Nelms, 1992).

Powell suggests that, in the conventional shopping mall high school where neutrality and accommodation are king and queen, most kids fall into the unspecial category. Based on twenty-five years of school-watching, I have to agree. The unspecial, you see, are kids who, because they aren't at either extreme of achievement, talent, ambition, deportment, or athletic prowess, receive a relatively small share of the fiscal and human resources of their schools. They don't belong to the AP or honors specialty group, the concert band specialty group, the learning-disabled specialty group, or the at-risk-and-gonna-drop-out group. No, Dick the Unspecial, to borrow a line from a tune popular at George Bush's alma mater, is the kid who will "pass and be forgotten with the rest," relatively untouched by the academic curriculum, or, in Ted Sizer's words, Dick "has shown up at school and at least gotten marginal grades" (1991).

Dick the Unspecial, characteristically, hasn't been given much attention as such in the literature. My own

recent ERIC search yielded only one hit, in fact, using unspecial as a "find" term. If the articles in EJ's focus issue of this October are symptomatic, and I believe that they are, educators tend to redefine unspecial kids in other terms, especially as "at-risk." Grant criteria and funding formulas, it seems, oblige administrators to identify students unlikely to stay the course and graduate, who need and, with luck and special funding, begin to get enough TLC that they remain in school and even learn. Doubtless, Dick is at risk in many ways, but he is no dropout. No, there he is, pretending to pay attention or passing notes to Denise Everykid in the next row, drowsing off in American lit, maybe whining to his malleable new teacher about the cruelties of an overnight reading assignment, or smiling blandly when asked to turn in a project submitted at the beginning of the term.

Anxieties about Dick, Derrick, and Denise's performance in high school and their tendency to clog developmental English and math classes when and if they attend college sparked much of the reform literature of the last ten years, beginning with A Nation at Risk's "rising tide of mediocrity"(1984). Too many reformers of the eighties, earnestly looking for sitcom solutions to complex problems which had emerged over decades, decided that, to fix things, schools had to stop allowing all the nonsense, quit accommodating every nuance of difference among student needs and/or preferences, and pare down the curriculum to old or new basics. Curricular pluralism, perceived by NCTE and other groups as an enlightened yet sensible response to an increasingly diverse student population, was to give way to a no-nonsense traditional bill of fare. Process learning was to be supplanted by greater emphasis on content, though in Horace's Compromise Sizer countered by observing that the curriculum of the early eighties was already "fact-bloated"

(1984). Good old-fashioned mainstream cultural literacy, urged E. D. Hirsch and his followers, would supplant basal readers at the elementary level and minority studies at the secondary (1987). (Of course, Hirsch is probably half right, but that's another paper.)

The Reagan administration, possessing neither savvy about nor commitment to public education, huffed and puffed and, under William Bennett's authorship, published James Madison High School (1987), a blueprint for an classical Western civ curriculum and an inspiring call to action to those few educational leaders who believe, it would seem, that the best way to improve basketball play is to raise the net, increase the size of the ball, and make the basket smaller.

By their senior year of English, the hypothetical students at hypothetical James Madison High would

> read a careful selection of European and non-Western fiction, drama, and poetry in translation. A good syllabus might include works by authors from classical Greece and Rome (Sophocles and Virgil); a more generous selection from noted authors of Europe and Russia (e.g. Dante, Cervantes, Molière, Balzac, Chekhov, Dostoevsky, Zola, Mann, and Ibsen; and depending on the instructor's knowledge and interest, a small number of works from Japan, China, the Near East, Africa, or Latin America (p. 13).

In 1990, George Bush, self-styled education President, brought together America's governors in Charlottesville, Virginia; they emerged three days later with the now familiar list of Six National Goals for education which the United States was to reach by the turn of the century. America 2000, heavily supported by the corporate sector, was formed soon thereafter; states and local communities began following suit immediately with their own mini-2000's. The

business community kept its hand in the pie throughout this process. On all levels, recession-strapped governments did little to fund programs which might move the nation toward reaching the Big Six. In my Southwest Georgia city, a fair amount of money has been spent on green and white signs proclaiming "Drug Free School Zones," but not much more.

In the states, curriculum reform in the eighties went in either of two basic directions: the first was to tighten the screws on local systems to make sure they were accountable for toughened policies and curriculum guidelines established in the state house; the second was to empower local systems and center reform where it belongs, in the hands of teachers and building-level administrators free of the usual morass of red tape and rules. The former strategy dominated the scene until three or four years ago; the latter, depending on where one looks, is increasing both in respectability and use. After all, site-based decision-making mirrors not only Jeffersonian political ideals but also Japanese management practices.

What has come to be known as the restructuring movement began for some with the second "direction" I mentioned a moment ago and the formation of the Coalition of Essential Schools in 1985. The Coalition gave both voice and a focus to many who sensed that reforms proposed in A Nation at Risk, E. D. Hirsch's Cultural Literacy, Boyer's High School (1983) or, for sure, James Madison High School weren't enough or were off the mark. Its founder, Brown University's Ted Sizer, reasoned that reforms such as lengthening the school day, improving technology, or increasing core curriculum requirements would fail to effect lasting improvement because their advocates failed to take into account the synergistic character of schools. To jiggle one part, Sizer would point out, is to jiggle the whole. Given this reality, successful reform had to begin with at the

beginning, with new structures and roles and perceptions of what matters in schools that work well.

The Coalition of Essential Schools is a national network of public and private schools, a majority of them secondary schools, committed on the one hand to a ground-up reconceptualization of how we in America keep school and, on the other, to nine common principles about what a good school is and how teachers and students in good schools spend their time. In its first eighteen months, the Coalition enrolled fewer than twenty members nationally. By early 1992, there were approximately 110 member schools, twenty "networking" schools close to membership, and another 150 "exploring" schools, those undergoing self-assessment and other procedures to determine whether or not Coalition membership would be the right step for the community, faculty, and administration (Sizer, 1992).

The Nine Common Principles are the philosophical heart and soul of an essential school. Although there is diversity in the means essential schools use to put common principles into practice, their efforts to simplify goals, to personalize the learning environment, to embrace coaching methods, to design "exhibitions" by which each student's demonstrates her readiness for graduation provide them with a tangible and distinct common ground.

Two of the Principles, the second and third, address issues of ability grouping; taken together, they add up to a strong commitment in the Coalition to heterogeneity. As evidence regarding the essential bankruptcy of ability grouping mounts (Evans, 1991; Gamaron, 1992; O'Neill, 1992; Wheelock, 1992), the Coalition's position causes its schools to become non-conventional learning environments for (dare I say?) every Tom, Dick, and Harry. Principle 2, the less is more principle, establishes that goals will be simple, "a limited number of centrally important skills and areas of

knowledge." Principle 3 deals with universality, stipulating that goals will be...the same for everyone, while the means to these goals will vary as the students themselves vary" (Prospectus, 1984).

In the May, 1992, issue of Horace, the quarterly newsletter of the Coalition, Kathleen Cushman details its position on tracking. "I'm all for tracking," she quotes Sizer. "Just give me as many tracks as there are kids" (p. 1). Essential schools, according to Cushman, are taking the hard steps necessary to raise academic standards for all, not just the few. Project assignments, coaching methods, cooperative learning, early intervention for students falling behind in heterogeneous classes, and small seminar groups are among the tactics transforming Dick's experiences in English class at an essential schoil.

A friendly observer of the Coalition since its inception, a visitor to Essential Schools in Brooklyn, in suburban Houston, in greater Louisville, and -- just last week -- in a bedroom community twenty miles east of Atlanta, I am convinced that, as we approach the millennium, essential schools and others which implement practices they develop offer the best hope for high-achieving Tom, for burdensome Harry, and for Dick, the fellow who, in the gently insistent environment of an Essential School, becomes special.

Until recently, I have not known of formal NCTE positions on grouping, either through its various commissions or resolutions. "The Essentials of English," approved by the Executive Committee in 1982, does not mention grouping, though the responsibility of English teachers to help "all students become literate and capable of functioning in an increasingly complex society" is noted. Through 1988, at any rate, when NCTE compiled decades of positions on a range of education issues in NCTE Forum, no

resolution has been passed on the subject. With the English Coalition Conference in 1989 and subsequent publications, however, we English teachers have taken a difficult but right stand. NCTE's flyer (1989) articulating the recommendations of the secondary strand recommends that we "group students heterogeneously in order to provide equitable educational opportunities for all." Participants in the Coalition Conference itself, which was comprised of NCTE, MLA, and College English Association representatives, among others, recommended that "students studying the same subject not be assigned to classes based on past performance or testing, and that teachers be trained to modify classroom practices in order to offer equitable educational opportunities within heterogeneous groupings in all classrooms" (p. 40).

Thus, we see how NCTE has begun to set the profession's sights on an English curriculum and classroom where Tom, Dick, and Harry might develop into literate young men with a better chance to succeed, to contribute, and to survive the unknowns of a new age, a new century.

Because what is commonplace in many essential schools can be realized in your local community, and because my co-presenter has been involved in the Coalition for several years, I am pleased to turn the balance of this session over to her. Vicki will detail specifics of how the Coalition is transforming Dick the Unspecial's school experiences by setting high but attainable goals, by adopting heterogeneous grouping, by helping teachers become generalists first and British literature or composition specialists second or, better yet, not at all.

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